

POINT to POINT

Victory's Cross Country is the new American tourer, and that will make it right at home down under.

Words by JEREMY BOWDLER, photography by LOU MARTIN

The saddle of a Victory Cross Country is not a bad place to be when the sun is out, the breeze is warm and the road is meandering through the Great Dividing Range like a lazy snake in no particular hurry. It's probably not a bad place to be in the middle of a thunderstorm either but, fortunately, we had the former weather conditions on the launch ride through the Sunshine Coast hinterland. It was all good.

Looking at the Victory in terms of the market competition is probably the best place to start, since the brand is a relative newcomer to Australia (despite having been building in popularity in the US for a decade or so). It's what prospective buyers will do, so here's our take on the machine.

The comparisons with Harley are the most obvious, of course: it's a large capacity V-twin, it's a cruiser and it's American. In many ways, though, it's more like the Japanese cruisers in terms of refinement, power delivery, finish and certainly brakes. Then again, when you put it up against the Japanese machines, it tends to make you think of Harleys.

At first, this makes it hard to pigeonhole, hard to categorise and hard to understand – from a purchaser's perspective – but it's really an extraordinary achievement. In a sea of cruisers, the Victory stands apart. It's not trying to be anything else, other than the new American motorcycle, and that's why it has taken a decade for the bikes to arrive here.

They had to be ready and they had to be right. Polaris, the parent company, takes a long-term view in a market more used to bi-annual model changes, and it shows.

VICTORY CROSS COUNTRY

There's not much variety in the powertrains or the engine specifications – the choice is a 101 x 108mm, 1731cc V-twin or a 101 x 102mm, 1634cc V-twin but from that very solid basis has sprouted enough of a range to give potential customers a good deal of tyre-kicking, chin-scratching pleasure. It's clear Victory doesn't want to compete in the general market; the company wants to own its niche.

SO MUCH FOR THEORY

But all of this is theory. What are the bikes like in practice? Seriously good at what they do. The Cross Country pumps out 68.6kW from the 1731cc V-twin, which is modest enough for the capacity but impressive for the class. The 147.8Nm of torque is more impressive and feels like it's available as soon as you slot the clutch lever home. The thing's got grunt from the ground up.

It generally makes the gearshift an optional accessory and you could quite possibly remove several of the ratios completely and not notice. Overtaking in fifth? Easy as.

That's the thing about a monster torque engine,

you don't need revs because you've got grunt and that makes gear shifting less important. Which is good, given the Victories are, to me, crying out for a heel/toe or rocker shift. The bike has the attitude, the footboards and the performance of a big cruiser, so why not go heel/toe? No one seemed to know, only that the focus groups used in bike development hadn't asked for it.

What they did ask for, though, was a quieter engine, so the Victory engineers squeezed an extra sixth cog – a serious overdrive ratio – into the 'box. The bike I was riding was showing a digital 1900rpm at 100km/h. Relaxed? You bet. With a 22-litre tank, that means – multiply by seven, carry the four – the seat will be the limiting factor on tour, not fuel economy.

Then again, now that the seat has been lowered a notch and the 'bars brought back a bit, the riding position is pretty much spot on and the seat is firm yet plush. You could ride forever. The dash certainly has the info about fuel usage to let you know where you're likely to have to start pushing...

IN THE AIR TONIGHT

The limiting factor for me, at 195cm, was the screen. Never mind the width, feel the height. The lowish screen just forced broken airstream into my face. A full-face lid would be a partial solution but I was wearing the open-face so as to benefit from the AM/FM/MP3-compatible stereo. The airstream stopped the music though the Vision, with the electrically adjustable version of the screen, was more user-friendly for me. Maybe an aftermarket taller screen might be a solution.

The switchgear is functional and effective, even if the stereo and cruise control switches are somewhere between the built-in and the tacked-on. In their favour, they are cleanly laid out, easy to use and not confusing when you're bombing down the highway.

Mind you, bombing down the highway and cruise control were the last things on my mind as we climbed up to some riding roads. I had the brakes and power delivery worked out but was a little unsure about the other half of the riding equation. I didn't have long to wait before coming to a couple of realisations.

The first was that the jar to the spine I was expecting from the occasional pothole never came and the second was that it took a long time before anything touched down.

Victory takes pride in the rear suspension travel – that'd be 'best in class'

again – and with good reason. None of those nasty road zits were transferred to the seat, though it took a while to shake off the cautious habits of a lifetime and ignore the bumps completely.

Same with the ground clearance. It felt weird at first carrying that much lean angle on a cruiser but, since neither the machine nor I fell off the edge of the world, I just went with the flow.

CONFIDENCE TRICKSTER

The bike, though large (everywhere), rolled into corners predictably and smoothly and, despite the bulk, proved very confidence inspiring. The only times it felt even slightly unwieldy was paddling about the car park. The low seat height helps here, as does the low centre of gravity. There is also an optional reverse gear kit available for those who sometimes forget to boldly go forward. Even so, I can think of 347 good reasons not to let the machine overbalance, and those are only the dry kilos. Fully tanked and oiled and

“POLARIS... TAKES A LONG-TERM VIEW IN A MARKET MORE USED TO BI-ANNUAL MODEL CHANGES, AND IT SHOWS.”

The Cross Country goes round corners better than it has any right to.



The skull paint scheme adds \$500 to the cost, but gets a lot of attention.

it'd tip the scales at a lot more than that.

That mass, though, is what makes the suspension work so well, with the sprung to unsprung weight balance firmly in favour of the suspension performance. Pillion accommodation is reasonably generous, with a broad, flat seat and footboards set slightly higher than the rider's (to prevent foot fights). There's no grab rail, but a passenger backrest is listed among the 100 or so optional accessories.

Pillions will, no doubt, appreciate the packing space in the lockable panniers and the removable liner bags that will make life on the road far more pleasant. Another nice touch was the waterproofing on top-opening pannier lids, a small detail that means dry clothes at the end of a wet ride. Offsetting that is the dual key setup for the ignition and panniers. BMW has been offering keyed-alike locks forever and it's time the rest caught up. At least the bags themselves are easily detachable from the bike, which gives added flexibility for users (and will make rear tyre changes easier).

One thing that would annoy me as an owner is the lack of angled valve stems



THE SPECS THAT MATTER

A bore of 101mm and a stroke of 108 in a 50° V-twin is always going to produce some serious torque; so much so that revving the Victory's engine is never worth the bother. At 1900rpm at 100km/h in the overdrive sixth, the engine's remarkably relaxed on the road. Long (for the class) travel rear suspension soaks up bumps and the long footboards add to the comfort. They're mounted high, too, for increased ground clearance.

Manufacturer Victory Motorcycles, Spirit Lake, Iowa, USA **Test machine** Victory Motorcycles, Melbourne, Vic **Price** \$29,995+orc **Warranty** 24 months/unlimited km **Call** 03 9342 3888 **www** <victorymotorcycles.com.au>

on the tyres. With big discs at the front and almost no access to the rim at the rear, getting a servo air nozzle onto the valves is a pain. I'd be getting my dealer to fit aftermarket angled valve stems before I rode away, otherwise it'd be a case of removing a pannier to check the rear tyre pressure.

EASY RIDER

After a day of riding the Cross Country around and about, I had a newfound respect for the marque. I'd enjoyed the Vegas and really liked the Hammer, but the Cross Country (with a few additions or alterations) would be a very serious long-distance machine. The fact that

the bike is so good out of the box is something Victory can be very proud of – and the guys at the launch were. Enthusiastic, too.

The only thing that needs to happen is for the market to ride the bikes and make its mind up. Over to you... 2w

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